

Exhibit 7

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BYLINE: Philip Jacobson

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On the slogan-spattered walls of Gaza, a menacing new message was being spray-painted within hours of the unveiling of Israel's startling deal with Yasser Arafat. "Our fighters' bullets will silence the cries of the negotiators," proclaimed Hamas in the name of the Islamic resistance movement, rejecting every aspect of the agreement to bring self-rule to Gaza and Jericho.

The next day, Hamas had another "martyr" to bury in the sun-scorched cemetery behind the Jabalaya refugee camp, where the Intifada was born out of squalor and despair. A youth was shot dead by Israeli troops as he brandished an axe at Palestinians ignoring the Hamas order to strike in protest at the peace plans.

Then a rally organised by Arafat supporters was broken up by 200 stone-throwing Hamas militants, denouncing the Palestine Liberation Organisation's leader as a "traitor". The red, black, white and green flag of the PLO, destined to fly over Gaza when the interim period of self-government begins, was ripped down and trampled in the dust as "a symbol of surrender".

With tension running high and Hamas claiming responsibility for killing a soldier in an ambush in the occupied West Bank, Israeli patrols were stepped up throughout the Gaza Strip, the sliver of Mediterranean coastline where a million Palestinians live under a harsh military presence. Before their historic agreement was signed and sealed, the government of Yitzhak Rabin and the PLO leadership were facing a challenge that both had expected and fear for good reasons.

"Let's say it straight out: the main enemy is Hamas," declared Yossi Sarid, Israel's environment minister, last week, acknowledging frankly that "we have to do everything to strengthen Arafat". Another senior Labour politician noted that the army would have to protect Arafat should he decide, as seems probable, to move the PLO headquarters from Tunis to Jericho. "It's Alice in Wonderland time," observed a sardonic Israeli officer at a checkpoint outside Gaza.

Those words will return to haunt the Rabin government if Gaza's fundamentalists have their implacable way, as they strive energetically to reap their full share of fruits of the Intifada. By most estimates, Hamas represents at least 40% of Palestinians in the occupied territories, and far more in the festering slums of Gaza, where their young street fighters have led the battle against Israel.

In the cool, whitewashed offices of the **Islamic Society**, Abu Al-Abed warns that Arafat too will face the righteous wrath of Hamas if he fails to govern according to the strictest laws of God in the land where he sometimes claims he was born (though Jerusalem and Cairo are also cited). With one hand on the Koran, Al-Abed, a plump, unsmiling figure, recalls coldly that the PLO chief once described the fundamentalists as "Zulus", primitive and outdated men.

Thumping the desk for emphasis, he instructed the interpreter to tell me to write this down: "If Arafat puts his name to all the concessions of this new agreement, he departs from the true path of Islam and must suffer the consequences at the hands of the people." Since Al-Abed had already volunteered, with vigorous chopping motions, that he believes implicitly in cutting off the hands of thieves and beheading murderers, any judgment he has in mind cannot be expected to be merciful: "fire and iron" is the phrase he uses.

As Hamas supporters gleefully point out, Israeli policy in Gaza has consistently backfired, most damagingly with the expulsion last December of more than 400 prominent fundamentalists to a barren hillside in south Lebanon. "The general in charge of the occupied territories now admits publicly that this was meant to help the PLO, and that it was a total failure," exults one well-placed insider.

"Very soon, all these heroes will be coming home and every Palestinian will rejoice at this triumph for the Islamic resistance and ask themselves what Arafat has ever achieved for us." The PLO's reported acceptance of the right of some 5,000 Israeli settlers scattered around the strip to stay put behind their electrified fences and razor wire has also damaged Arafat personally and, by extension, weakened the appeal of the peace package for Gazans.

"Look, everyone in Gaza knows the Israeli public is ready to dump those settlements because they have no religious or strategic value and people are sick of reading about attacks on their soldiers here," says the same Palestinian observer. Even among the settlers themselves, there is resigned acceptance that time is running out: at Netzer Hazani, a community formally inaugurated by Rabin in 1975, the 300 Jews exporting fruit and vegetables are already beginning to think about how much compensation the prime minister will offer.

It was always on the cards that introducing self-rule for Gaza, the eternal trouble spot, would involve far more formidable problems than are posed by Jericho. In that somnolent little town of some 10,000 people, half an hour's drive from Jerusalem in the sweltering Jordan Valley, the Intifada has often seemed strangely remote, the occasional violence infinitely less disruptive than in the cockpit of Gaza, 60 miles away.

The habitual calm of Jericho has now been shattered by journalists from all over the world descending on the town, fingering guide books that record how Mark Antony presented it to Cleopatra and Jesus fasted for 40 days on the Mount of Temptation near by. While platoons of television crews hunted for the house Arafat is rumoured to have his eye on the decaying palace where Jordanian monarchs once spent the gentle winters or the white villa with a swimming pool bemused residents were peppered with questions about how it feels to be making history again. Not too good, was the widespread response, even taking into account the cash that may flow in after the PLO arrives (property prices are already shooting up, stirring the first of many bitter disputes to come over ownership of land). "I came here to escape from politics," observed a waiter at the Temptation Cafe and Restaurant (record takings last week), recalling how his home town, Ramallah, had been radicalised by the Intifada.

"Hamas was not really dug in here, though you can see their slogans everywhere and a few people have been burned out for ignoring Intifada strikes," said Nader Jabar, a businessman. But who was going to keep the PLO and the Islamic militants from each other's throats in the first few months of self-rule when power was up for grabs? Could foreign investors or tourists ever be tempted to a place that will henceforth be known as the "PLO capital", bearing the unavoidable association with past terrorism? According to the town's amiable mayor, Jameel Khalaf, there have been no contacts, let alone discussions, with the PLO about what lies ahead.

It is Jericho's good fortune that the Israeli settlers living around it are not, for the most part, those firebrand Zionists drawn to the West Bank always Judea and Samaria for them by powerful imperatives of religion and nationalism. At the hilltop Moshav Vered, where the bougainvillea is blooming, residents such as David Zohar are concerned less with ideology than the future of their community when the five years of interim autonomy are up: "Not one single representative of the government has come to talk to us, but then I'm only a peon in this whole new galaxy of peace," he complained.

It has not escaped his notice that Shimon Peres, the foreign minister, basking in the limelight as architect of the deal with Arafat, is singularly evasive about the long-term outlook for Jordan Valley settlements. Fearing the worst, a group of right-wing activists has staged a sit-in at Jericho's ancient synagogue: the potential for confrontation with Palestinian residents was heightened by the announcement that Torah (Bible) classes would be held there.

There are also still voices calling for punitive action against the Palestinians, the loudest belonging to Ariel Sharon, the old warhorse of right-wing politics in Israel. As Sharon sees it, the best place for all PLO representatives is in the same glass-walled dock in which the kidnapped Nazi Adolf Eichmann finally stood trial for his part in the Final Solution.

Back in the dust and filth of Gaza, the PLO is doing some hard thinking about how to handle fundamentalist opposition after the takeover. In a spartan office down a warren of side streets, Thiab Al-Louh sits beneath a framed photograph of Arafat and insists that whatever the tensions, Palestinians will never shed each other's blood in Gaza.

A tough customer, Al-Louh is a man with nine years of a life sentence for attacks on Israeli troops behind him (he was swapped for Israeli army prisoners in Lebanon) and an almost tangible aura of ruthlessness. "I think the Islamic militants will acknowledge and respect our position," he says carefully, insisting that the PLO will respect the results of the elections to be held in Gaza and Jericho in nine months' time. But what if Hamas wins and sets about constructing an Islamic statelet, brusquely excluding Arafat's Fatah wing from even limited power? "Well, we're all Palestinians and Muslims, and I think we are sophisticated enough to manage a democratic decision."

As for those Gazans who had collaborated with Israel, Al-Louh was silent for a moment, then said thinly: "Our people will deal with this issue in an appropriately civilised way."

At the Islamic Council's headquarters, there is indignation that the "self-elected" PLO is already talking like a government-in-waiting. "Tell me when Arafat received a popular, democratic mandate," demands Al-Abed, waving his Koran in agitation. Then Dr Hassan Dib arrives, and any facade of moderation disappears as this hard-line fundamentalist launches into a ferocious denunciation of the Gaza-Jericho accord.

"The entire agreement is unacceptable and those who negotiated with the Israelis are 100% traitors. We want all of Palestine. There is no Israel." Allowing Israeli troops to oversee security in Gaza was another betrayal, Dr Dib said.

As we were leaving, a heavily bearded young man politely offered an account of Arafat's supposed perfidy in ordering the execution of a Gazan notable who had publicly supported the 1977 Camp David accords. "Now he is embracing the Israelis as an ally, which just shows you how deceitful a traitor he has become. Thank you for listening. Go with God."

What happens in Gaza over the next weeks and months is going to be crucial for the prospects of a wider Middle East peace, because it is there rather than in Jericho that this momentous exercise must first prove itself. The Israelis and the PLO fully understand the risks involved and would be astonished if their enemies on both sides of the great divide did not seize every opportunity to sabotage the process on the ground.

The Israeli public may still be struggling to grasp the full significance of the bewildering turn of events that has seen their government wooing Arafat as "an ally" and offering land for peace. But war weariness runs deep here and the Intifada has left raw psychological scars: like the average Palestinian struggling to live through the maelstrom, most Israelis are ready to give the new accord a chance, if only because the alternative is endless conflict.

For all the sound and fury of Israel's extreme right, the wilder threats of "war between the Jews" should the government press ahead, there is every reason to believe that Rabin and Peres can deliver their side of the deal and that responsible opposition politicians will fight it by democratic means alone.

Israeli security sources confirm that the intelligence agencies have been ordered to concentrate on infiltrating Jewish extremist groups. And concluding a triumphant press conference last Wednesday, with Egypt's foreign minister by his side, Peres warned in icy terms that any "rebellion" would be dealt with with the utmost severity.

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